Uniformity of the Graphic Design in the Office Type User Interface's

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Abstract

From the viewpoint of a graphical designer, one can conclude, that until these days program developers are very suspicious when they have to deal with graphically rich interfaces for utilitarian computer programs. However, presentable interface, in spite of its specificity, has to be interesting and with artistic quality.

Many people today are bored and tired from business-like environment and aspire for something "lovable", idyllic, natural, unusual, mystical, dreamlike etc. To my mind, for typical "office man/woman" his/her everyday communication with computer interface is too unrelieved. It is related to the interface design on a large scale, including all of kind of utilitarian computer programs. For example, utilitarian interface design should not be conservative and ascetic. It can be developed in minimalism graphic style, but this style must be individual. Very common feature for interface designs is utilization of symbols, taking into account only information behind this symbol, but ignoring visual appearance. Interface design drift for "to be interesting" does not mislead one from the provided information. It is just opposite - uninteresting, impersonal design can lead to growing antipathy against operations provided by the concrete application. People love surprises. Likewise people love to wander and to be auxiliary while acting in everyday life.

One can use a synthesis of the traditional fine art trends (painting, graphics etc.) in GUI design and if it is applied within common interaction with classical computer graphics, 3D objects or fractal graphics etc. - then very interesting, new electronic media aesthetics paradigm is created. I think that interface design should be visually as individualistic as possible, but at the same time design has to stick to unified, conventional principles of functionality. Working in the field, I am developing various ways to users can be able to customize their graphic user interfaces in the standard environment.

Most important thing is that interface design has to serve its aim, to strike, to have high quality and to be professional work of art. It is misleading assumption that rich and aesthetic interface design can challenge the functionality of the program. I believe that these principles contribute a lot to such aspects as ergonomics, functionality and navigation. Of course, history of arts proves that tradition always has opposed new trends in arts. It is very complicated process while something new has been accepted, recognized, introduced and leaves a message for the future as something good.

Despite the rapid development of computer technologies, the continual growth of computer users, and the multiplicity operation systems, the significant problem today is the depressing uniformity in the office type user interface, as well as the lack of tendency to diversify it. In my opinion, the typical "office person's" everyday communication with the computer interface is too monotone and not interesting from the aesthetic viewpoint. It regards the interface design in the broad sense, including operating system, office and web portal and other designs. I think, that not only processes in the realm of human-computer interfaces facilitate this uniformity, rather it has deeper roots in the contemporary technological, consumer and visual culture. Therefore overcoming of the uniformity is not an easy task, but still it has to be thought of.

One of the first analysts of the European culture and art who described the influence of technology on art and aesthetic reception was Walter Benjamin. He saw that art in the age of mechanical reproduction was losing its originality, and people began to lose the urge to perceive unusual artistic creations. W. Benjamin writes: *"Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. [..] The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. The decisive reason for this is that individual reactions are predetermined*

by the mass audience response they are about to produce..." (Benjamin, 2000, p. 332). W. Benjamin analyzed the transformation of the work of art and the loss of aura of original works that came about with the technical reproduction of photographs and films. It has to be admitted that the visual materials in computer further the transformation of art even more. Visual materials in the frame formed by the computer screen can be reproduced, edited like photographs, their original is the basis for mass multiplication, and they are not single specimens with the unique aura of artwork. However, the new features have emerged. If visual images in films and photographs are related to the content and specific aesthetic form, then graphic elements of interface design for the most part have the secondary meaning speaking from the artistic viewpoint. Bob Cotton and Richard Oliver in their book *Understanding Hypermedia 2000* write: *"A successful interface effectively becomes invisible, allowing the user to become immersed in whatever task they are involved. [..] Successful interface design depends upon three elements. Firstly, an emphaty with the user's perception of the system; secondly, a deep understanding of the system the user will be using, and its capabilities and weaknesses; and thirdly, a rigorous concern with details. [..] The irony is that when all three elements have been fully taken into account, the interface effectively disappears from the awareness of the user. This, perhaps, is the tragedy of the interface designer: the more successful the designer, the less s/he will be noticed."* (Cotton & Oliver, 1997, p. 59).

This kind of position is characteristic in most books on the successful interface (see, for example: N.V. Juppa, 2001, pp. 67-68). In my opinion, they fail to note the significance of the fourth element – the artistic value. Wilbert O. Galitz recognizes such general principles of aesthetically pleasing graphic design: meaningful contrast between screen elements, groupings, three-dimensional representation, colors used effectively and simply (Galitz, 2002, p. 41). As long as the value of the artistic factor won't be recognized (only pleasing appearance is described), there will be conclusions about the tragic fate of designers, that, of course shouldn't be like that.

Much more reflections upon the designer's role can be found in discussions that have arisen in the realm of graphic design. For example, Rick Poynor in his book *No More Rules. Design and Postmodernism* describes discussion that protests against the "disappearance and tragic fate" of the designer, showing instead the "designer as producer" (following T. Adorno notion of the author as producer). There are also other perceptions: designer as translator, designer as performer (Poynor, 2003). The role of the artistic factor here is highly valued, unlike the practical disregard for it in the realm of human-computer interaction.

Nevertheless, many computer users admit, that the standardized environment of, for example, operating systems (MS Windows, Linux, MacOS and others) is too monotonous though it conforms to three rules of creating the interface mentioned above. They serve to make easier the understanding and training because the world is the site of global interactions. Maybe it is also because computer has been often regarded only as a tool.

The standardized environment of operating systems was created taking into account perception, psychology, working needs of the "average" person, but it doesn't pay attention to aesthetic and creative feeling of the human being. Today, in the view of the immense distribution of this operating system, something like the "effect of McDonaldization of the computer interface" has emerged. The positive aspect is the recognition of interface in all circumstances; it gives psychological assurance of being able to work with this interface easily. It ensures – like with McDonald – the certain quality, the safety of functioning. Still, on the other hand, there occurs the unification of visual material, or the *Orvel* type subjugation and control of the visual. In a sense it is a blending of individualities and all colors, that results in the gray tone. And for the most part the office type user's interface elements are in gray tones, in order primarily to relieve eyes and make it possible for main elements to dominate. It is interesting that gray color is been regarded as the most neutral and favorable for the background perception. But in the culture studies literature it is regarded as the symbol of mass culture. Prior to the World War II people of the middle class presumably wore gray clothes and wrote on the grayish blue paper, painted their interiors gray. Now computers – both hardware and software, often carry through the domination of the color gray.

The negative aspect of the "interface McDonaldization" is the ennui of perception, the lack of new stimuli for visual emotions, etc. From the point of view of simplification of the interface perception the important points seems to be: minimalism + functionalism, but from the point of view of human creative and aesthetic feelings they are: graphic individuality + functionalism. It is a contradiction of the contemporary interface design, because, if the first task is being carried through, the second loses, and vice versa. The solutions of this contradictions in a great deal depend upon the economical and financial considerations: the uniform interfaces – with little possibilities to vary them – are cheaper and easier to sell comparing with rich, artistic and multiform ones.

However we shouldn't agree to comply with the situation where the economical considerations play the main role in solving this contradiction. Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, "visuality has come to play a central role in modern life" (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 13). All cyberspace will do is make the experience interactive instead of passive. There are no conditions that can determine something to be neutral of non-aesthetic. Often the artistic goals of graphic design are misunderstood – to produce the artistically significant interface doesn't mean to create in the style

of rococo or radical minimalism. In order to develop manifold abilities of the human being there is necessary **the creative and individually suited interactive environment**. This wish has been demonstrated by the whole history of the European modern art, where by the means of art images, genres, fashion a person gains ability to acknowledge his individual essence, to create the spiritually intimate, self-suited environment, and to resist the uniformity of the consumer culture.

The new forms of visual expression are generated by computer, but art is often ascribed the subordinate role. In the realm of art there is little research (at least known to me) about the artistic qualities of the interface design nowadays because for the most part theoretical works are devoted to the themes how to achieve good usability, functionality and ergonomics in the interface design. M. Rush in his book *New Media in Late 20th- Century Art* quotes R. Cornwell's words: "When the art world is seen as a market, it is understandable why it has virtually no interest in interactive technology" (Rush, 1999, p. 212). There are far less investigations about the artistic qualities of the user's graphic interface comparing with those devoted to ergonomics, psychology of perception, and development of communication. I believe it is not right since the human being needs the aesthetically qualitative and varied communicative environment, especially in the situation where computers play ever-greater role in the society, production, market, and recreation.

The interface designs usually are more directed towards the market, taking into account taste peculiarities of mass purchaser and user, rather than creation of the high value, aesthetically significant works. From the designer's viewpoint it has to be concluded, that program developers still regard contemporary and graphically rich interfaces with distrust. However, good interface, despite its particularity, has to be also interesting and aesthetically rich. To reach it the following is necessary: interface graphic individuality, freedom, and independence from the standardized environment of operating systems that stress functionality and ergonomics. For instance, the operating system MS Windows XP still lacks the integrated possibility to vary its user programs – each by itself. Everything is too unified. Thus there has been depreciation of user's psychological readiness to recede from old habits to eye the uniform visual interface sight and of desire to enrich his *visual event*. *Visual event* is an interaction of the visual sign, the technology that enables and sustains that sign and the viewer (Mirzoeff, 1999, p. 13). For example, possibilities of interface skin creation and choice for the product Winamp designed by the company Nullsoft are immensely popular, and thousands of users have created their graphical skins of the Winamp interface. Of course, the are multi media programs, but, if such change of interfaces programs were adapted to the office software, I think users would gain something. Of course, it is good that one can change desktop images, mouse cursors, sound effects and other elements (as offered, for instance, by the program package MS Plus), still the appearance of application windows can be changed minimally. Nevertheless all attempts to modify the customary rectangular forms of program windows can help to develop absolutely new principles of the interface structure.

The utilitarian interface design shouldn't be conservative and ascetic. The widespread phenomenon in interface design is the using of different symbols regardless their visual appearance, relying solely on information encoded into the symbol. Direction of interface design towards being interesting doesn't mean user's swerving from the theme, quite contrary – the uninteresting, non-personal design can cause constantly growing dislike of actions offered by the specific application. People like surprises. As well as people like to fantasize and to be in charge in different everyday manipulations. The picture with a diskette during the installation process clearly depicts the concrete process. It could be also an apple, a monkey, a fisherman or something else as well. However, the design is conceptually and thematically created in order to in all these cases to remind the user in an associative manner the respective process.

Why don't give the user himself the possibility to imagine whatever he likes? This is an associative approach. The interface design too has a full potential to surprise users in different ways. Many people use to perceive computer as another human being – being in constant contact with interface arouse reflections, prompted, first, by visual perception, and then – by interpretation and emotions. But for person essential is also to feel well, that is to feel pleasure. This predisposition to pleasure is one of the factors that influence evaluation of art, in this case of the interface design. I think that interface design should be visually as individualistic as possible, but at the same time design has to stick to unified, conventional principles of functionality. Working in the field, I am developing various ways to users can be able to customize their graphic user interfaces in the standard environment.

There are many graphical possibilities and styles according to which to create the interface design – the business-like, the national, the romantic, the postmodern, the subculture (ghetto, underground), the hi-tech, the electronic, the futuristic, etc. It is possible to use in LGI designs also the synthesis of traditional genres of figurative arts (painting, graphic, and others), and if it interacts with the classical computer graphics, 3D objects, fractal graphics, and so on, then there emerges a very interesting paradigm of new electronic media aesthetics.

In my opinion, the office user's interface designs should be individual as much as it is possible, but still retaining the unitary, conventional principles of functionality. The most important: the interface design should univocally **serve its purpose, to leave an impression**, and it should be the high value and professional **artwork**. There is a wrong opinion that rich and aesthetic interface design challenges the program functionality. I believe that this particularly is the significant input in the aspects of **functionality**, **ergonomics**, and **navigation**. Of course, none of the new art manifestations ever has been widely acknowledged! It is a complicated process, when something new (not only in the realm of art) is being created and introduced.

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